

AMIDA AS SAVIOUR OF THE SOUL

IN the conception of Amida, the Buddha of Eternal Light and Infinite Life, the True Sect (Shin-shu) which teaches the doctrine of salvation, finds its reason of existence. The name of Amida is first mentioned in the *Larger Sukhāvati-Vyūha Sūtra* ("the Land of Bliss"). When Buddha Śākyamuni once dwelt in Rājagriha, on the Mount of Grīdhra-kūta (the Peak of Vulture), with a large assembly of Bhikshus, the venerable Ānanda, having risen from his seat, spoke thus to the Blessed One:

"Thy organs of sense, O Blessed One, are serene, the colour of thy skin is clear, the colour of thy face bright and golden. As an autumn cloud is pale, clear, bright, and golden, thus the organs of sense of the Blessed One are serene, . . . Moreover, I do not know, O Blessed One, that I have ever seen the organs of sense of the Tathāgata so serene, the colour of his face so clear, and the colour of his skin so bright and golden before now. This thought occurs to me, O Blessed One: probably, the Tathāgata dwells to-day in the state of a Buddha, probably the Tathāgata dwells to-day in the state of a Mahānāga; and he contemplates the holy and fully-enlightened Tathāgatas of the past, future, and present." (*Larger Sukhāvati-Vyūha Sūtra*, p. 3., in the "Sacred Books of the East," Vol. XLIX.)

This question of Ānanda greatly pleased the Buddha.

"Well said! well said! Ānanda; excellent indeed is your question, good your philosophy, and beautiful your understanding! You, O Ānanda, arrived for the benefit and happiness of many people, out of compassion for the world, for the sake of the great body of men, for the benefit and happiness of gods and men, as you think it right to ask the

Tathāgata this matter." (*Op. cit.* p. 4.)

The fact is this: when the heart of Śākyamuni, filled with love for all mankind, was about to preach the doctrine of great bliss for the salvation of all beings, his face shone beautifully, and his whole figure became as serene as an autumn cloud, and inspired Ānanda to ask the Buddha the question as above cited. The word came from Ānanda's own lips, but the spirit of the Master was plainly visible in them. The heart of Śākyamuni, which reached the highest pinnacle of purification naturally moved Ānanda who was his beloved disciple, and made his heart reflect like a looking-glass what was going on in the Buddha's. Ānanda understood the supreme state of "mutual contemplation of the Tathāgatas." To get a good crop of grains, there must at first be a well-tilled field prepared for sowing seeds. So the appearance of a great spiritual movement in the world is to be preceded by well-cultivated minds that are ready to receive the doctrine of a Holy One; for then the latter will find it easy to penetrate thoroughly into their hearts. The time was ripe now, besides the monastic religion of self-enlightenment and penance, for the seed of a religion of salvation by faith to grow and bear fruit in the well-cultivated minds of the Mahāyāna Buddhists.

Thus was opened the way to the doctrine of salvation by faith. Before making the most excellent vows (*Pranidhānas*), as recorded in the *Larger Sūktivratī Sūtra*, in presence of his Master Lokeśvararāja, (世自在王佛), Dharmakāra (法藏) still in his disciplinary stage, declared his intentions with these Gāthās (偈):

"May my country be just as the state of Nirvana, and without equal. I will pity and deliver all beings.

"May those who come to be born there from the ten quarters be pure and joyful, happy and at ease, when they arrive in my country. May Buddha witness that this is my true realisation! I make prayer for that desire, full of strength

and vigour. "May those Bhagavats of the ten quarters, whose wisdom is unimpeded, know my thought and practice! Even if I abide in the midst of poison and pains, I shall always practice strength and endurance, and be free from regret."

Then again, after having affirmed the forty-eight Prani-dhānas (vows or prayers), this Bhikshu Dharmakāra through the grace of Buddha recited these verses:

"If these prayers, surpassing the world, which I have made and by which I should certainly attain to the highest path, should not be fulfilled, may I not accomplish the perfect knowledge.

"If I should not become a great giver, so as to save all the poor, for immeasurable kalpas, may I not accomplish the perfect knowledge.

"If my name should not be heard all over ten quarters, when I attain to the path of Buddha, may I not accomplish the perfect knowledge.

"May I become the teacher of gods and men, having sought for the highest path, by generosity, deep and right meditation, pure wisdom and practicing the pure practice (*Brahmacarya*).

"The great light produced by the spiritual power [of the Tathāgata] shines over unlimited countries, and destroys the darkness of three [kinds of] defilement, and saves all beings from misfortune." (From the Chinese version. See Appendix I to "Anecdota Oxoniensia.")

Generally speaking, we may judge men by their desires and divide them into three groups: (1) those who only feather their nests at the sacrifice of others, (2) those who are satisfied with themselves, neither injuring nor benefiting others, and (3) those who sacrifice themselves for the sake of all mankind. The Bhikshu Dharmakāra was the greatest and deepest of the third group. He considered himself quite one

with all beings in the universe, and thought that no self-perfection could be attained without perfecting others thereby. In other words this means the attainment of infinite mercy, supreme wisdom and power, which are embodied in the person of a Saviour.

The number of his so-called Pranidhanas (vows or prayers) differs according to the texts, five of which exist in Chinese translations and the sixth is in Sanskrit known as the *Sukhivati-Vyūha Sūtra*. They are sometimes counted forty-eight and sometimes twenty-four. The most important ones are those concerning (1) the attainment of enlightenment, (2) the attainment of infinite life and wisdom, (3) the glorification of his name, (4) faith as the reason of enlightenment, and (5) returning to the world for its salvation. Therefore, if one attains to the faith by hearing Amida's name as mentioned in the Sutras and discourses, then one will surely be born in the Pure Land after death, and becoming an owner of infinite life and wisdom, will begin to manifest great activity to save all beings. These great vows he fulfilled by practising the Six Virtues of Perfection for innumerable kalpas. And it was just ten kalpas ago, so state the Sutras, that he became Amida. So we read in the "Wasan" or Buddhist Hymns by Shinran Shōnin :

"Since He who is Infinite attained unto the Wisdom Supreme, the long, long ages of ten kalpas have rolled away, the light of His Dharmakāya is in this world eyes to the blind " (1).

"The Buddha of Infinite Light, together with the Bodhi-sattvas of Compassion and Wisdom, having taken the Ark of the Divine Promise that is voyaging on the ocean of birth and death, have gathered and saved mankind therewith." (286)

This being the case, the Saviour of the Shin-shu as the object of the faith may be said to resemble to a certain extent the God of Christianity. But Amida's attitude towards sin

is what distinguishes the Shin-shu from Christianity. The God of the latter is a God of love and justice, while the Buddha is mercy itself and nothing more. In the world the principle of karma prevails, and the Buddha never judges. The God of Judaism was represented by Christ to be the God of love, yet he is made to judge our sins and mete out punishments accordingly. Amida of the Shin-shu, however, knows only of infinite love for all beings, wishing to deliver them out of the eternal cycle of ignorance and suffering, in which they are found migrating. In Amida, therefore, there is no wrath, no hatred, no jealousy.

There is another aspect in the conception of Amida, besides the one we have already referred to; for he is to be interpreted also in the light of the fundamental principle of Buddhism. Amida, as the Tathāgata, naturally appears as a person embodying in himself the Absolute Truth, which is also infinite mercy and infinite wisdom. So we read in the *Wasan*, 85 and 53:

“Having great pity our Eternal Father lighteneth the dark night of ignorance, manifesting himself in that Land of Joy as the Buddha of Infinite Light which enlighteneth all the worlds with its immeasurable glory.

“Ten kalpas of ages have rolled away, since He who is Infinite attained unto the Wisdom. Yet before the myriads of the kalpas He was.”

So Amida, our Saviour, is an absolute being transcending time and space, and manifesting himself in the Pure Land, the only purpose of which is to save all sinful beings. In short, out of the absolute Buddha or the Dharmakaya has the Buddha of salvation appeared, and naturally, the spirit of Amida is in deep and intimate communion with the Absolute itself. And on our side, as we are also sharers in the being of the Absolute Buddha, we and Amida, must be said to be one in substance, only differing in functions.

When these fundamental ideas of Buddhism are understood, the Shin-shu conception of the faith and salvation characteristically different from that of Christianity grows intelligible. It is true that these thoughts are not consciously recognised with all their metaphysical implications and logical subtleties by followers of the Shinshu; for such is not at all necessary in their religious life. Do they not feel perfectly at home, with no sense of fear or humility, and in no way hesitatingly, when they come to an inner realisation that they are one in the Absolute? Do they not indeed feel as if they were filial sons to a father all pitying and infinitely lovable?

Thus we see that there are two aspects in the idea of Amida. First, Amida is the embodiment of the infinite mercy and wisdom which was obtained, according to the moral law of causation, by perfecting himself through discipline, by performing all that is required of man as a moral being, by accumulating all the merits needed for the salvation of all beings, so that when we believe in him we acquire all those virtues which will immediately be transferred to us and will perfect us. Secondly, Amida is conceived as a person embodying the absolute truth in its highest form, which we also realise in various degrees.

Practically considered, Amida as our Saviour is infinite in love, wisdom, and power; he is the culmination of our religious yearnings. Those who believe in him are thus saved from ignorance and suffering, gain enlightenment, and find in him a guide of their daily life.

We read in a book entitled *Anjin-ketsujo-sho*—"On the attainment of the Faith"—the author is unknown, but probably written by a contemporary of Shinran Shōnin, the founder of the Shin-shu): "He who sees the body of a Buddha sees also his mind. The mind of the Buddha is great love. The love the Buddha conceives for us penetrates into our bones and marrows, soaks thoroughly into our heart. It is

like unto a charcoal started to burn, we cannot get away from him even if we wanted; minds stained with the evil passions, or with covetousness, hatred and infatuation, are completely cleansed by the virtues of the Buddha. When the saved and the truth are identified, '*Namu-amidabutsu*' comes as a realisation."

In the *Wasan* we have: "Take refuge in the Mighty Consoler. Whenever His Mercy shineth throughout all the world, men rejoice in its gladdening light." (8)

"He who is Infinite never resteth; for, together with the Bodhisattvas of Compassion and Pure Reason, He laboureth that the souls of them that duly receive Him may have salvation, enlightening them with the light of His Mercy." (17)

"Though our eyes are so blinded by illusions that we discern not that light whereby He embraceth us, yet that great mercy forever shineth upon us and is not weary." (211)

As for Amida, infinitely wise, illuminating all the darkness of folly, and making us see things as they are, read the following stanzas from the *Wasan*.

"Seek refuge in the true Illumination, for the light of His Wisdom is infinite. In all the worlds there is nothing upon which His light shineth not." (2)

"The darkness of ignorance perisheth before His light. Therefore He is hailed as the Buddha of Radiant Wisdom. All the Buddhas and the threefold choir of sages praise Him." (9)

"The Buddha of that inexpressible Light that shineth into the worlds of the ten regions, forever enlightening the night of ignorance, hath most certainly opened the way of Nirvana to every man, who even for one moment rejoiceth in receiving His Holy Vow." (154)

Thirdly, as for Amida as embodying infinite power to

save all sentient beings we have the following *Wasan* :

“Seek refuge in the World-Honoured, for His divine power is almighty and beyond man’s measure, being made perfect in inconceivable Holiness.” (19)

“Great as is the Might of the Divine Vow of our salvation, so light is the heaviest of our sins. Immeasurable is the Wisdom of our Father, and therefore they that are stray, as also the weary, shall never be foresaken.” (270)

“*Nembutsu* (念佛) means to think of Buddha, and to think of the Buddha is to think of the merits attained through the mysterious power of the great vows made by the Buddha, which cuts asunder for all beings their bonds of birth and death and makes them born in the Pure Land of immovable faith. When the mind of the devotee coincides with the great vows of the Buddha, all his being—mind, action, and speech—is born in the being of the Buddha and attains to his perfect enlightenment.” (*Amjin-ketsujo-sho*.)

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